

Analysis of Factors Militating Against Autonomy in Public Universities in Nigeria

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Abstract: This paper examined the problems that have militated against university autonomy in Nigeria. Secondary data were used to provide empirical support for the paper. Data were collected from both print materials and online publications. The paper concluded that integration of the federal universities into the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS), centralization of the university system, centralization of admission, governing council dominance, poor implementation of the university Autonomy Bill and poor funding model of public universities are the tools used by the Nigerian government to undermine universities autonomy in Nigeria. Based on these challenges, the paper hereby suggested that the federal government should remove all federal universities from the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS) platform and implement the University Autonomy Bill Act of 2004.

Keywords: Autonomy, Public Universities, financial, academic, administrative.

Introduction

Public universities are universities owned by the government. Public universities are universities established to provide post-secondary schools for Nigerians. Public universities are universities established by an act of parliament to serve the interest of the general public. Public universities deal with the provision of teaching, research and community services. Public universities in Nigeria are grouped into federal and state-owned universities. The federal universities are owned by the federal government of Nigeria while the state universities are owned by the state government. The total number of federal and state public universities is 49 and 59 across the country (NUC, 2023).

The objectives of the universities in Nigerian Higher education, including professional education have the following aims: the acquisition, development and inculcation of the proper value orientation for the survival of the individual and societies; the development of the intellectual capacities of individuals to understand and appreciate environment; the acquisition of both physical and intellectual skills which will enable individuals to develop into useful members of the community; the acquisition of an overview of the local and external environments (FGN, 2014).

The programme of the universities includes teaching, research and provision of community service (Ogunode, Jegede, Adah, Audu, Ajape (2020). The realization of the universities' objectives and cardinal goals or programmes depends on the universities' independence.

Universities globally are structured to operate with full autonomy. Azenabor (2022) submitted that Autonomy characterises the university system worldwide. It is one of the cherished ideals of a university. Autonomy is opposed to the centralisation of the control of universities. It confers on each university the right to select or admit its students, decide what to teach and determine areas of research. These ideals of university autonomy have however been eroded in Nigeria by certain national imperatives and constraints. It is imperative to examine problems undermining universities' autonomy in Nigeria.

Concept of Autonomy

The Confederation of Indian Universities (2004) defined autonomy as the necessary degree of independence from external control that the university requires in respect of its internal organization and governance; the internal distribution of financial resources; staff recruitment; the setting of the condition of study; the freedom to conduct teaching and research. Also, Ajayi (1989) looked at autonomy as the freedom of the institution to make its own decisions on broad complex issues without interference from external or non-university agencies. Autonomy in higher education especially in the universities according to NOUN (2009) implies that each institution must be governed according to the law that establishes it. Every institution has its law, edict or even decree which spells out the functions of the various organs, such as council, senate, congregation, faculty, department and institute etc. Autonomy in higher education relates to the protection of the institutions from interference by government officials in the day-to-day running of the institutions especially on the issues related to the selection of students; the appointment and removal of the academic staff; including the Vice- Chancellors/Rectors/Provost; the determination of contents of higher education and the control of standards. For the university to meet up with the global best practices there must be financial, academic, human resources and administrative autonomy in all aspects of the university's operations known as total or complete autonomy.

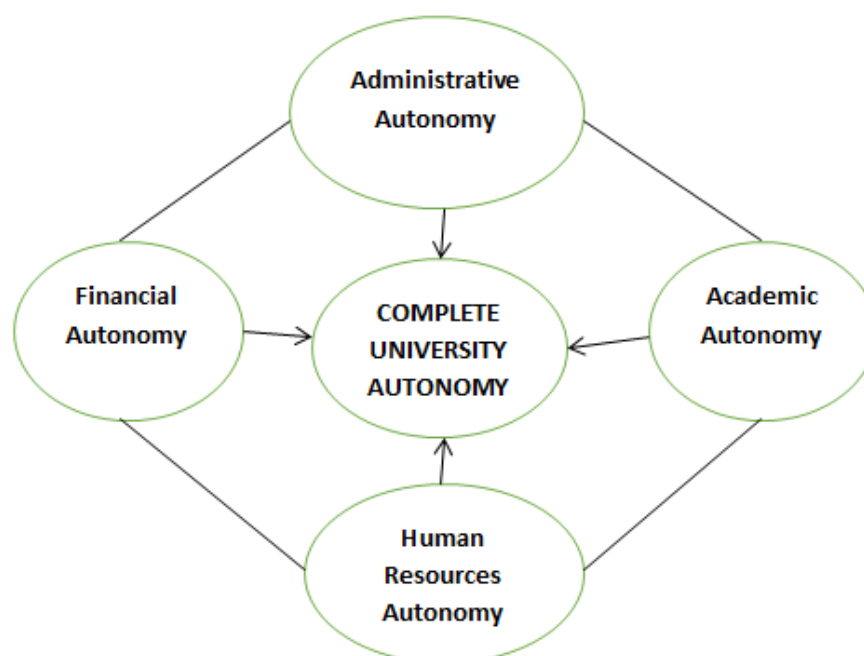


Figure 1: Complete Autonomy Model of University Operations

Source: Ogunode & Ayoko (2023)

From figure1above, the complete (total) universities' autonomy is the freedom of the universities to determine their financial operations, academic operations, human resources and administrative processes without external influence. Universities' autonomy is the freedom of universities to coordinate their activities of staff employment, programme development, students admission, faculties and department establishment, awards of degrees and finance administration without any interference or influence from the government.

There are forms of university Autonomy and they include;

Institutional Autonomy

Institutional autonomy according to Fourie (2004) is the relative freedom of the institution to conduct its affairs free from outside interference, whether from the state, the market, donors or other stakeholders. According to NOUN (2009), institutional autonomy has been regarded as the cornerstone of the higher education system. For Anya (1982) institutional autonomy is the ability conferred on institutional arrangements of the state on each university to manage its affairs and consists usually of the corporate freedom of institutions to exercise its prerogatives in the areas of appointment of its staff and of its governing authorities; pursuit of institutional goals as defined for itself under the rules of the law of the land; insulation of the institution in the management of its routine affairs from political, administrative; religions and other authorities. From above, institutional autonomy in this paper can be seen as the freedom universities enjoy to conduct their affairs without external influence. Institutional autonomy is the power given to universities to operate within their ethics without external influences. Institutional autonomy is the ability of the universities to make laws, policies and development programmes without influence from outsiders. According to Fourie (2004), institutional autonomy has two dimensions: Substantive autonomy and Procedural autonomy.

i. Substantive Autonomy

This has to do with the power of the institution to determine its own goals and programmes.

ii. Procedural Autonomy

This refers to the power of the institution to determine the means by, which its goals and programmes will be pursued, and the how of the academy. Justifying her position on this subject, she cited Berdahl (1990) who holds the essential ingredients of institutional autonomy to include: Freedom to select staff and students; determine the conditions under which they remain in the university; Freedom to determine curriculum contents and degree standards; and Freedom to allocate funds across different categories of expenditures.

Individual Autonomy

Individual autonomy is the right of the universities to conduct their academic activities without interference. Individual autonomy is the academic freedom of the universities that covers teaching, researching and community services. The Confederation of Indian Universities (2004) viewed individual autonomy as academic freedom. Individual autonomy has to do with members of the academic community. That is scholars, teachers and students pursuing their scholarly activities concerning ethical rules, and international standards without outside pressure. Furthermore, they maintain, that academic freedom engages the obligation of each member of the academic profession to excellence, innovation and advancing the frontiers of knowledge through research and diffusion of its results through teaching and publication. Fourie (2004) defined academic freedom or individual autonomy as the who, the how and the whom of teaching and research by the individual academic. Academic freedom according to Berdahl (1990) is the freedom of the individual scholar in his/her teaching and research to pursue truth whenever it seems to lead to without fear of punishment or termination of employment or having offended some political, religious or social orthodoxy.

Azenabor (2022) stated that a concept that is a corollary to University autonomy is academic freedom, which constitutes the soul of the university. University autonomy is to guarantee academic freedom, which is vital to the university. Academic freedom refers to the freedom of scholars to conduct research, advance the frontier of knowledge and disseminate the results of their research without fear or hindrance. It is the right to hold any opinion, no matter how unpopular, to express it freely and the tradition of not only tolerating but also encouraging the holding of diverse and differing views on any issue, is the hallmark of academic freedom. (University Amendment Miscellaneous Provision Act, 2003:3). Autonomy prevents forced

loyalty to the party in power, and political consideration rather than concern for truth is a decisive factor in determining intellectual issues. It prevents job insecurity and rubber-stamping of government decisions. Autonomy is necessary to safeguard the highest standard of intellectual, social, moral and political performance of scholars. Autonomy facilitates the university's educational research, teaching and social responsibilities/ services.

Reasons for university autonomy in Nigeria according to Azenabor (2022) are: it is a traditional right, which has worked over the years. The responsibilities of creating new knowledge through scholarship and research, transmitting and preserving culture, developing the capacity in students for critical and independent judgment, and cultivating aesthetic sensitivities are best carried out in environments free from direct external control and domination. The complexity of academic work requires a fair measure of independence. Autonomy provides for both staff and students checks and balances and better morale in a democratic society.

Methodology

A content analytical approach was employed in this presentation. Secondary data were sourced from journals, government records and publications, reports from national dailies or newspapers and internet materials.

Factors Undermining Autonomy in Public Universities in Nigeria

Integration of the universities into the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS)

The integration of the universities into the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS) lowered the prestige, and status and violated the autonomy of the federal universities. Aluko, (2020) argued that the first, and by far, the most worrisome aspect of the IPPIS is the fact that it is a blatant violation of the concept of University autonomy. Contextually, it is the capacity of a University to make an informed, un-coerced decision by itself, it is the state or condition of having independence or freedom by a University to decide its course of action. Federal University autonomy is a global practice associated with Universities all over the world and it has four main dimensions, namely; academic, organizational, financial and staff autonomy (Aluko, 2020). Academic autonomy simply means the University's capacity to manage its, internal academic affairs independently. Such issues include; students' admissions, academic content, quality assurance and the introduction of new degree programmes. Organizational autonomy has to do with the Universities' ability to decide freely on issues like decision-making, executive leadership, legal entities and internal academic structures (Doki, 2019). Financial autonomy has to do with Universities' ability to decide freely on internal financial matters such as managing their funds independently and without interference from any quarters and also setting their strategic objectives. Staff autonomy has to do with having the independence to recruit the quality of staff they need to discharge their functions creditably in line with global best practices (Akasi, 2020). To all these must be added the fact that University autonomy gives absolute powers to a body called the University Governing Council which is officially recognized by the law establishing Federal Universities in Nigeria. It is this body that is saddled with the responsibility for the control and management of university funds, employment and promotion of staff. All edicts and statutes establishing Universities and the nation's constitution give full powers to the governing councils as the supreme body concerned with the day-to-day operation of the university (Akasi, 2020). Azenabor (2022) opined that another by-product of the loss of university autonomy and its subsequent integration of the universities into the civil service structure was the emergence of the Visitor, Chancellors and Pro-Chancellors as heads of the universities. Whereas, “nowhere does the original act of the universities list the Visitor among the constituent bodies making up the university.” Omeje, Ogbu, Nkwede, & Njoku, (2021); Aluko, (2020, March 15) and Aluko, (2020, May 15) all agreed that Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS) violated the autonomy act of Nigerian universities.

Centralization of the University System

The centralization of the university system in Nigeria has undermined public universities' autonomy. NOUN (2009) established that at the inception of the university system in Nigeria, the thought of a centralized system was not paramount. The universities then existed as entities conducting their affairs independently. The growth of the university system over time necessitated the establishment of the National Universities Commission (NUC) in 1962 to play an advisory role and act as a buffer between the Federal Government and the Universities and not to control the latter. The commission was saddled with the responsibility of receiving and disbursing subventions to universities. NOUN also submitted that overtime, NUC has metamorphosed from a coordinating functioning body to a full-fledged commission of its own, exercising such powers as: accrediting programmes; approving the establishment of departments and faculties; insisting on a minimum academic standard; engaging in the teaching function of academic staff through the virtual institute for higher education pedagogy (VIHEP); undertaking sabbatical placement; assessing academic journals, ranking of universities; and evolving a draft curriculum on entrepreneurial studies. NOUN observed that no doubt these functions exercised by NUC are noble. But the fact remains that it has constituted itself as an external agency infringing on the individual university's autonomy to chart its courses in such areas as the creation of academic programmes; curriculum determination; programme standardization; and training of academic personnel. Azenabor (2022) opined that with the National Universities Commission (NUC) monitoring and supervising the universities, the prestige, autonomous status and effectiveness of the universities were lowered and eroded. So, the government brought in NUC as a weapon of its centralised control. It prescribes terms of accreditation of universities and minimum standards. Even where a separate salary scale has been worked out for the university staff, it remained under government control. Ogunode, Ugochukwu & Iroegbu (2022) and Ogunode, Akinjobi, & Musa (2022) are in agreement that the centralization of the university system in Nigeria has militated against universities' autonomy and development.

Centralization of Admission

Universities' autonomy is also undermined through the centralization of student admission. Azenabor (2022) pointed out that a further problem eroding the autonomy of Nigerian universities is the taking over of admission and the centralisation of same in the hands of the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) which is controlled by the government. So, we now have a long list of admissions not based on only merit, but also discretion, educationally- disadvantaged areas, catchment areas, etc. The universities have thus lost control of the choice of who comes into the universities. Consequently, we have many students on campuses who are morally decadent, drug addicts, cultists, and academically barren, who have not been properly admitted by the university as such. Some campuses are even over-populated, thereby endangering lives and properties. NOUN noted that the idea of a centralized board engaging in the conduct of matriculation examinations and placement of qualified candidates into Nigerian established institutions was never thought of when the early institutions were established. At that time each institution conducted its entrance examinations and selected qualified candidates. This situation prevailed until when the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB), and JAMB POLY were established to conduct matriculation examinations. Assessing the existence of JAMB/JAMB POLY over time, one can see that both JAMB/JAMB POLY has trespassed into the individual autonomy of higher education to select their students. The common malaise associated with this body concerning higher education is the growing trend in examination malpractices, creating serious selection credibility problems. It is a common sight in our higher institutions to see students with high JAMB/JAMB POLY scores, but performing poorly academically. This situation has compelled several universities into setting aptitude tests to confirm the credibility of the students.

Governing Council Dominance

Public university autonomy has also been undermined in Nigeria through the appointment of governing councils for universities. NOUN posited that the domination of the university council

by government-appointed officials to the detriment of minority representation of university community members serves as another avenue of autonomy breach in Nigerian universities. The issue is that the council normally exists to protect the interest of the university, then it should naturally follow that its membership should be dominated by university community members, but in our setting, the reverse is the case, politicians and non-stakeholders in the education industry are preferred over stakeholders. The government's position regarding her dominance of the Councils is that since she is the primary source of funding the system, she must control it through her agents to ensure accountability in such areas as financial and physical resources, programme quality, student admission and staff recruitment. The introduction of the government councils into the university system in Nigeria with politicians dominating has violated the autonomy principles of Nigerian universities (Ogunode N, J & Emmanuel, 2023; Ogunode, Atobauka & Ayoko, 2023).

Poor Implementation of University Autonomy Bill

The poor implementation of the university autonomy bill as passed by the National Assembly in 2004 is another problem that has undermined university autonomy in Nigeria. Azenabor (2022) observed that in Nigeria, a University Autonomy Bill was passed by the National Assembly in 2004, which aimed at making new and better provisions for the autonomy of universities in Nigeria. University autonomy simply means self-determination and self-governance or self-rule. It refers to the right of the universities to determine the manner in, or the ground rules by which they are governed and their capacity to control their affairs and shape their destiny, free from external interference or control. In the Autonomy Bill, titled: "An Act to Amend the University (Miscellaneous provisions) Act and to make new and better provisions for the Autonomy of Universities and other related matters", Section 2.3, page 2, describes university autonomy simply as the capacity of the university to govern itself. The poor implementation of laws governing universities in Nigeria has contributed to the development of the universities and the lack of autonomy.

Funding Model of Public Universities

The funding model designed for public universities in Nigeria does not put into consideration of full financial autonomy. Nigerian public universities were established to solely depend on funding from the government. This funding model has not helped the universities to survive on their own. Ogunode (2022) submitted that the financial model of public universities in Nigeria is not the best because it makes the universities dependent on government funding. The funding model designed for Nigerian public universities from the onset did not favour financial autonomy and this has constituted a lot of problems for the autonomy status of the universities. The funding model has been formulated to make the universities depend on the government for funds to run the universities. NOUN (2009) submitted that autonomy in higher education in Nigeria became almost an impossible request because of government ownership of the institutions in Nigeria. It has been incomprehensible to the government to hand off the control of its investment. A major chunk of recurrent and capital funds for public institutions (federal and state) is obtained from the government. This has made the government to be more inclined to the adage that says "who pays the piper dictates the tune". The fact that bulks of funds for institution operations come from the government and the duty to be accountable for the public funds have made successive governments to be reluctant and thus institute mechanisms to undermine the autonomy of higher education.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The paper looked at the challenges that have undermined universities' autonomy in Nigeria. The paper concluded that integration of the federal universities into the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS), centralization of the university system, centralization of admission, governing council dominance, poor implementation of the university Autonomy Bill and poor funding model of public universities are the problems that have undermined universities autonomy in Nigeria. The paper hereby recommended the following;

1. The government should remove federal universities from the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS) platform and grant them full financial autonomy.
2. The government should implement the university autonomy Bill of 2004 and grant autonomy to public universities and free them from the shackles of external interference which is currently impeding universities development in Nigeria.
3. The Universities should be allowed to conduct their admission just like their counter from other Countries. Centralized admissions through JAMB, where candidates now write JAMB examinations and are later subjected candidates to another examination by the various universities should be stopped.
4. The interfering role of the National Universities Commission should be reviewed while allowing the Commission to function in its original advisory capacity;
5. There should be an increase in the number of university community members in the Council as a sustainable way of protecting institutional autonomy.

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